DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 518 IR 013 042

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TITLE Cagney and Lacey: Negotiating the Controversial in Popular Television.
PUB DATE Jul 86
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the International Television Studies Conference (London, England, July 10-12, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Commercial Television; Conflict; *Content Analysis; *Females; *Feminism; Individual Differences; *Police; *Programing (Broadcast); *Social Problems; Television Research
IDENTIFIERS *United States

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the ways in which the commitment of the television series Cagney and Lacey to the examination of often controversial social issues from liberal or progressive standpoints--especially issues associated with the women's movement--is worked through in narrative practice. The origins and development of the series are described, as well as its position in a long line of television crime/detective stories and the character portrayals of the two women detectives. Several of the episodes are then reviewed to analyze ways in which Cagney and Lacey negotiate controversies such as ethnic disadvantage, the vulnerability of illegal immigrants, class differences, latchkey children, and various feminist issues, including abortion. It is concluded that the series must be regarded as progressive in that it succeeds in promoting openness and awareness of socially controversial situations with considerable explicit commitment to its positions, but not as radically feminist or radical in any other way. (21 end notes) (Author/CGD)

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Jim Hillier

# Cagney and Lacey: Negotiating the Controversial in Popular Television

Paper presented to the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

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# Cagney and Lacey: Negotiating the Controversial in Popular Television


## Abstract

Cagney and Lacey is not an unrecognised television series: it has won Emmy awards and vigorous public support helped to bring it back after network cancellation. Like other 'quality' series such as Hill Street Blues, Cagney and Lacey is also commonly accepted as being 'liberal' or 'progressive' in stance. Cagney and Lacey seems not to enjoy 'cult' status in the way that Hill Street Blues does, however, and very little serious attention has been given to it. This paper seeks to clear some of the ground by pointing out some of the concepts in which the series must be seen and to some of the ways in which it works. In particular, this paper seeks to discuss some of the ways in which the commitment of the series to the examination of often controversial social issues, and especially issues associated with the women's movement, from liberal standpoints is worked through in narrative practice.

Preliminaries

Cagney and Lacey is a current television cop show, made in the USA, featuring two women detectives working in the fourteenth precinct of the New York Police Department. Inidividual story episodes juxtapose and inter-relate their investigation of crimes, as partners, their relationships with each other and their relationships with family, lovers, etc. The show is made by Mace-Neufeld Productions for Orion Television, and networked by CBS at prime time. Each episode fills a sixty minute slot on US network television; in Britain, where it has been shown on BBC Television (BBC1), with no breaks, it occupies a forty-five minute slot. The show has had a chequered commercial history, being cancelled and re-instated by CBS twice, but seems secure at present (1986). It has received several Emmy awards (principally for Tyne Daly's performance as Mary Beth Lacey, but also for Patricia Green, one of the writers) and some critical attention, though relatively little compared with, say, Hill Street Blues, Lou Grant or M*A*S*H. However, Cagney and Lacey deserves attention for several reasons:-- in a period of conservatism in both society and popular entertainment, Cagney and Lacey maintains an intelligently liberal perspective on many controversial social questions; in particular, it is one of the few popular series which has made serious attempts to deal with issues focussed by the women's movement; no doubt partly responsible for this is the unusually high level of contribution to the series (compared even with Hill Street Blues or Lou Grant) of women in creative capacities like production, direction and writing.

Origins and Development of the Series

The idea for the show originated with Barbara Corday and Barbara Avedon. Involved together in anti-Vietnam War lobbying in 1968-69, they then wrote together for television (initiating, for example, a project which some fourteen years later became the movie Mr Mom, about a man who stays home and looks after house and children while his wife goes out to work: Corday records the incomprehension and anger which the project met with originally - "You would have thought we were talking about overthrowing the government"[1]). In the early 1970s Corday got her husband, producer Barney Rosenzweig (who later produced, among other television shows, twelve episodes of Charlie's Angels) to read Molly Haskell's study of the representation of women in Hollywood film, From Reverence to Rape[2]. What interested Corday particularly was the idea that women in movies had been portrayed traditionally as opposites, or in opposition to each other, but never as 'buddies'. Rosenzweig proposed that Corday and Avedon write a role reversal buddy movie featuring two women. After working with New York police for some time, Corday and Avedon came up with the Cagney and Lacey series project, but between 1974 and 1981 they failed to interest anyone in the idea. Turned down as a series by all three US networks, CBS finally went with the project as a television movie (called Cagney and Lacey, with Loretta Swit as Christine Cagney and Tyne Daly as Mary Beth Lacey), which won a 43 audience share. CBS then asked for it to be made into a series; the first season, 1982-3 (with Meg Foster replacing Loretta Swit as Cagney), was originally cancelled after two shows, but then re-scheduled. At the end of the first season CBS cancelled the show altogether. Exceptionally - following high ratings in summer re-runs, an Emmy award (the only CBS show to win one), pressure from viewers by a letter campaign, press stories and doubtless other considerations like its generally poor seasonal showing - CBS reconsidered and ordered a limited number of new episodes for 1983-84 (with Sharon Gless replacing Meg Foster as Cagney - Gless had been the original choice for Cagney in 1981, but had been unavailable), then a full

season (22 episodes) for 1984-85, and again for 1985-86. The audience share in the US has been respectable (approximately 25) but probably more important than share has been has been the fact that Cagney and Lacey (like Hill Street Blues, for example) "delivers a younger, urban, upscale demographic which has become more valuable (to advertisers) than 'mass' numbers".[3]

Context

In terms of US television, Cagney and Lacey comes in a long line of crime/detective series.[4] Despite periods in and out of popularity, the crime series has been a television staple, providing some of the most successful and long-running of all series, from Dragnet (NBC 1952-59) to Perry Mason (CBS 1957-66) and Kojak (CBS 1973-78). In the 1970s the crime series tended to feature predominantly white, male investigators (with the innovation of defined ethnic identities) such as Ironside, Kojak, Columbo, Banacek, Harry O or Cannon, and the main centre of dramatic interest was the idiosyncratic character of the investigator in relation to the process of the investigation itself. This general tendency continues, although Starsky and Hutch and The Streets of San Francisco pointed to a tendency to feature investigators in pairs (as in the current hit show Miami Vice). Women were relatively unimportant in all these series: only Policewoman (NBC 1974-78) (a spin-off from Police Story) made any attempt (though hardly a successful one) to provide a positive female image.[5] Charlie's Angels (ABC 1976-81) of course did feature women investigators and offered representations of female friendship and solidarity (as well as, very intermittently, some stories of special interest to women), although the women remained very much decorations (and were, of course, male-directed).

Despite some obvious affinities with this tradition of crime series, Cagney and Lacey is in some ways, like Hill Street Blues, closer in spirit to a series like Naked City (ABC 1957-63) in its emphasis on a liberal concern with the quality of (especially urban) life, ethnic deprivation, etc., than to 70s series like Starsky and Hutch or Kojak. Also like Hill Street Blues, its very deliberate

mix of police work and private, personal life in its stories owes something to the current popularity of television melodrama.

US television responded rather less obviously and readily to the impact of the women's movement than the US film industry did in the 1970s. Undoubtedly this had much to do with differing perceptions of the audience. The film industry, after the disasters of the 1960s, learned in the 1970s to try to target more specifically what remained of the cinema audience. Young women (and men) with some degree of consciousness of the women's movement (even if that consciousness was represented by, say, Cosmopolitan magazine rather than Ms. or anything even more radical) formed an important part of that audience. Thus the mid-1970s saw a number of 'women's films', films which could be said to be responses of some kind to the women's movement.[6] Important among these movies were both female 'buddy movies' (like Julia, Girlfriends, The Turning Point[7]) and gender reversal action movies (like Coma, Gloria, Alien), as well as some gender reversal action buddy movies (particularly at the exploitation end of the market, with movies like Caged Heat, The Great Texas Dynamite Chase, Terminal Island). One aspect of 'the problem of being a woman today' - the broad thematic of many of these films - was very often the particular relationship, for women, between working and 'private' life.

US network television in the 1980s, like the movie industry in the 70s, has become more concerned to target its audience(s) (in this case as targets for advertisers) and we can relate a show like Cagney and Lacey to the 'women's films' of the 70s. Like them, Cagney and Lacey offers women protagonists who are not necessarily conventionally glamorous (or in whom glamour becomes foregrounded) and who negotiate work and private lives to an audience with at least some degree of consciousness of feminism, or at least of the kinds of issues which the women's movement introduced into more general social debate.

Format

Not surprisingly, given its title, Cagney and Lacey depends for much of its generation of narrative and its exploration of thematic material on the character and social background of the two detectives themselves (although various regularly featured male colleagues also play important roles, sometimes figuring prominently in secondary narrative strands). Roughly the same age (late 30s) and both detectives (though Cagney has been promoted recently to sergeant) very committed to and good at their work, Cagney and Lacey are otherwise extensively differentiated.

Chris(tine) Cagney is blonde (though it has been hinted not naturally so), conventionally attractive, single. Mary-Beth Lacey is dark-haired, slightly plump though not by any means unattractive in conventional terms, married with two male children (and hoping her currently expected third child will be female). Cagney carries with her many connotations of middle-class life style and background: she is college-educated, dresses casually but 'glamorously' (and expensively), is affluent (with a trust fund), owns her own converted loft (bare brick walls, bamboo blinds, etc.) in SoHo, is familiar with social etiquette such as menu French, jogs. Lacey, on the other hand, carries very strong connotations of working-class life style and background: she has not been to (or at least not finished) college (and her lack of college education is frequently referred to - usually by herself); she has a strong 'boroughs accent' and few social graces (what Cagney calls "filet of chicken breast" Lacey refers to as "chicken cutlet"); she dresses much more 'ordinarily' and is often worrying about money (so that the extent and cost of Cagney's wardrobe is a frequent cause of comment); her husband, Harv(ey), is 'blue collar' and together they rent an ordinary, small apartment in Queens and go bowling once a week[8].

Something of the relationship and differences between the two, as well as something of the series format more generally, is delivered by the credit sequence, one of the main functions of which is to establish Cagney and Lacey as both similar and different, both individuals and a partnership. The initial

shot establishing Lower Manhattan beyond Brooklyn Bridge is followed by a telephoto long shot of Cagney and Lacey walkin together in the street, talking and laughing, dressed very similarly in white blouses and dark trousers/skirt (the image of them returned to in the end credits), with other pedestrians among whom 'ordinary' working women (including a very pregnant woman) predominate. Superimposed over this shot are several pairs of inset stills of the two women, showing them first as 'ordinary' individuals, then holding guns, ending with paired police badges. From this point in the credits the emphasis is on them as a pair, in the squad room and in action: a car at speed, chasing someone on a subway train, pulling their guns on a male suspect on a stairway, expressing frustration at having lost someone in a subway station, escorting a male from a subway exit - and being 'flashed' by another male as they do so (the implication of the three brief subway shots is of a successfully completed mission). Alongside the images of action are images of repose: Cagney stopping to look at clothes in a store window and being pulled away by Lacey, Lacey being kissed by husband Harv through the car window (with Cagney looking on), Cagney jogging in Central Park (while Lacey awaits her). Exemplifying the sense of the two detectives on the divide between work and private lives, the credits end with them leaving the squad room for the evening, Cagney dressed very 'glamorously' in white clothes and fur coat (connoting going 'on the town'), Lacey dressed in brown bowling gear and carrying bowling balls, only to be turned back by Lieutenant Samuels, their superior, the image freezing on their dismayed or incredulous expressions. Depending on the year of the series (since some of the male costars have changed) a number of male characters have also been introduced, in action and then in still insets, pre-eminently Samuels (played by Al Waxman), large and somewhat morose, Detectives Marcus Petrie (Carl Lumbly), black and sympathetic, and Victor Isbecki (Martin Kove), Polish and the show's embodiment of machismo, shown in the credits admiring his physique as he puts on his shirt, and Lacey's husband, Harvey. Cagney and Lacey are also seen, in the credits, briefly among the men in the squad room, with the possible implication that the two women are 'up against' the men, looking anxiously at their reactions to some-

thing. The credits are overlaid with the show's bouncy, energetic, positive theme music.

The differences between the two women allow for the exploration of a range of issues from two different perspectives. Cagney, for example, embodies the single woman and her relationship to the social 'norm' of the couple, while Lacey's situation embodies the problem of gender roles in the couple in marriage, and across these differences are different class perspectives. It is central to the series, for instance, that Cagney is very firm about wishing to remain single but at the same time often dissatisfied with the instability and other problems which being single can create, and equally that Lacey is both strongly committed to her marriage ("the best marriage in America" as Cagney calls it) and to marriage in general while often dissatisfied with aspects of her familial role and troubled by the relationship between work and family. Some of the surprises in the playing out of the differences between the two women come from the fact that Cagney is very often 'conservative' in her attitudes while Lacey is generally more 'liberal' - not what one might conventionally expect from the profiles overall.

One of the possible ways in which the differences between them might work is that Cagney is more immediately attractive to male spectators, certainly more conforming to traditional male notions of attractiveness in women (in the fictional world of the series Cagney's attractiveness and availability are emphasised and are important in generating narrative), while Lacey is more immediately attractive to women spectators, for qualities other than conventional attractiveness. Among these qualities (which also include practicality and street wisdom, a good sense of humour and irony) is a greater social experience and commitment, which regularly results in Lacey's point of view, particularly on controversial social issues, being privileged over Cagney's, and this is very important for the broad political perspective of the series. This is not say that Cagney is unsympathetic and does hot also function as an identification figure: both women serve this function, very often in a dialectical relationship, as we shall see in some of our examples.

There is little in either the story organisation or visual style of Cagney and Lacey that presents itself as different from some supposed television episodic norm in the way that has been claimed for Hill Street Blues (though Cagney and Lacey does adopt the single most important narrative device of Hill Street Blues - the restriction of point-of-view to what the detectives experience, in contrast to, say, Kojak, where the spectator would normally see the crime being committed and move between criminals and police, with the consequent considerable difference in the spectator's focus. The narrative strategies of Cagney and Lacey episodes can very from one to the next from a relatively unilinear, single strand story such as "Heat" (UK tx. 24.12.84) to the complex combination of three parallel, interwoven stories in an episode like "Out of Control" (UK tx. 1.1.85). Most characteristic, however, is the parallel story structure, what Low Grant producer-director-writer Gene Reynolds has described as the 'Double Curve': "Like in Lou Grant where we also have parallel stories. Sometimes there's no connection, sometimes they mirror each other, there's a counterpoint. I like that way of working. It gives the story a tremendous amount of motion. You work on one area, one theme, one story, then - we call it a Double Curve - you pick up another story... Both stories are developing as you bounce back and forth... The fact that there's sometimes a harmonic between the two stories gives them a certain amount of weight, and gives the audience something that they have to reach for... Make them reach for it, don't lay it right out in front of them"[9].

Thus, an episode like "Out of Control" has three major story strands: 1) (beginning and ending the episode) Lacey's familial problem arising from discovering her older son Harvey Jr. playing with her gun (though unloaded) and the crisis this precipitates over how he can be made to understand the dangers; 2) (set up in the second sequence and concluded in the penultimate sequence of the episode) Cagney's problems in finally meeting the teenage children of her boyfriend Dory and, later, his ex-wife, and how she deals

with this; 3) Cagney's and Lacey's joint investigation of a burglary and accidental killing, involving the illegal acquisition of a gun by an old couple, the victims of the crime. Also packed into the 45 minutes of the episode are minor story strands involving: Petrie and Isbecki and their dislike of the jobs they are getting assigned; Samuels' acquisition of a microwave oven for his office and Lacey's knowledgeable and keen interest in it (she does not have one, but she has read all the brochures); Lacey's sense of herself growing old, talking about almost buying support-hose. These minor plot elements are important: they refer to recurrent elements in the series (male identity crises, Lacey's financial constraints, and so on) and in a sense remind us of series continuity. This feeling of continuity is important for the major stories too: Cagney's problems negotiating being single and being half of a couple and the tension for Lacey between work and family do not begin or end with this episode. Clearly stories 1) and 3) relate through the theme of guns and gun laws and the various arguments around this question (see my discussion below). At the same time, story 1) is centrally about the relations between children and parents/adults, thus relating it to story 2). In the process of moving between and combining these stories, considerable complexity is generated around both gun law issues and questions of parental roles. The effect is similar to that described by Chris Wicking in relation to a Lou Grant episode: "one way or another just about every aspect of 'the problem' is discussed - but in an organic, logical way, arising either out of the investigation or the natural conversation of the characters".[10] As with Lou Grant there is a level of didacticism here, but it is "never a sermon". Indeed, in comparison with Lou Grant both the more oblique relationship of the main stories in Cagney and Lacey and its greater sense of continuity across the series work even more successfully against any feeling of heavy-handed emphasis on a 'problem'.

## The Handling of Controversial Issues

As these observations on the "Out of Control" episode might imply, Cagney and Lacey likes to take on controversial social issues. Other examples would be issues like ethnic disadvantage (among many examples, the minor narrative strand in the episode whose major narrative was Lacey's breast cancer, "Who Said It's Fair?", UK tx. 8 & 15.10.85) or the vulnerability of illegal immigrants (for example, "Beyond the Golden Door", UK tx. 30.7.82, or "Ordinary Hero", UK tx. 3.12.85). In such cases the typical strategy is an exploration of the subject through the investigation of a crime or incident and the consequent discussion between Cagney and Lacey about both the particular case and the general issue. In this process Cagney regularly adopts a more 'hawkish' position: she argues, in "Out of Control", for example, that there is nothing wrong with guns if you respect them and know how to use them and she comes up with the familiar conservative argument that taking guns away from decent people advantages the criminals; in "Who Said It's Fair?" she argues very straightforwardly that a single black mother's child should be taken away from her because he is not properly looked after. Lacey regularly adopts a more liberal position: she does not buy the "decent folks" argument, arguing that guns have the single purpose of killing people ("it's not the movies here - when you're dead, you're dead, you never get up again"); and she insists on the difficulties a single mother faces in raising a child. In a variety of ways, Lacey's positions become privileged. In both cases Lacey's stance is seen to derive from personal experience of the problems ("I'm not talking about laws, I'm talking about my kid") and her concern is given weight by its depth, and by the privileging of Lacey's personal, domestic drama in the structure of the episode. In addition, the "decent folk" who resort to the use of a gun (albeit illegally and incompetently) suffer immeasurably. In the case of "Out of Control", Cagney is not shown to change her position but there is no doubt about the position embodied in the narrative: in "Who Said It's Fair?", however, Cagney certainly does change her position. Here, again, Lacey can

speak from experience ("I was a latchkey kid before they called it that") where Cagney is seen to speak on the basis of superficial impressions or prejudice. By the close of the episode (during which, countering the negative impact of her position, she risks her life to save the child) Cagney is shown to have 'learned', faced with with both Lacey's strong conviction and the forceful example of the mother's commitment, accepting that the mother is doing her best in severely disadvantaging conditions for her son and arguing, in Lacey's absence, for day care and custody for the mother.

What is often partly at stake in Cagney and Lacey, as in the "Who Said It's Fair?" episode, is class and class experience. Class itself is so rarely an explicit subject in U.S. culture, popular or otherwise, that it almost qualifies as a 'controversial issue'. As we have seen, class differences are always implicit in the relationship between the two women: sometimes they become explicit. The episode "American Dream" (UK tx. 17.9.85), for example, openly addresses the question.[11] Although the case under investigation in the episode concerns racketeering, the main thrust of the narrative involves Lacey's husband Harv changing from working with his hands to becoming an 'entrepreneur' and the possibilities this opens up that they might be able, finally, to buy a house (a very modest one, but a house all the same). Ultimately, Harv, losing his sense of identity and of 'making something' and seeing the way this affects his marriage relationship, cannot make the change. Before this resolution is reached, however, Lacey and Cagney engage in discussions which reveal not just class differences but barely concealed resentment on the part of Lacey and unconscious superiority on the part of Cagney, despite their friendship. Differences of wealth are important here, but class differences are vital too: Lacey tells Cagney she is "prejudiced against men who are blue collar" and when Cagney calls that ridiculous, Lacey asks if she has ever gone out with a man who did not graduate from college (she has not), and so on. Most tellingly Lacey points to the gap between the rhetoric in the U.S. about success and freedom and working people's experience of it: she talks about growing up in the U.S. with the

implication and assumption that one would marry, own a house, etc., while in fact she has been "feeling cheated all my life" and how there are almost no choices any more for people like her and Harv (and all this while she and Cagney are on surveillance of a vast Nassau County mansion paid for with the profits of racketeering). Lacey does not get her house.

Women's Issues as Controversial

The treatment of controversial issues from a liberal standpoint in Cagney and Lacey has been noticed most, not surprisingly, in terms of its treatment of women's issues: "Chris and Mary Beth confront the pitfalls of the 70s and 80s"[12]. Many episodes, without being necessarily 'feminist' in emphasis, have explored problems in familial relationships in which women are central, such as child abuse.

16.10.84; "Fathers and Daughters", UK tx. 3.9.85), abandoned children ("Baby Broker", UK tx. 26.5.84), problems around bored wives ("Matinee", UK tx. 21.4.84), and so on. That Sharon Gless (who plays Cagney) should want to characterise the show as humanist rather than feminist[13], however, points to the fact that it has often been tagged, popularly, as 'feminist'. Certainly, a relationship to feminism or the women's movement is acknowledged by many of the show's creators: producer Rosenzweig, for example, says "Sometimes I'll read a letter to the editor in Ms. and it will become a scene"[14].

From the start, the conception of the show had a slant reflective of the kinds of issues which the women's movement had placed on the social agenda. The synopsis of the pilot feature, for example, read: "Christine Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey are partners, detectives in search of a murderer. But the girls' (sic) struggle against crime in the violent streets of New York City is made worse by the prejudice of their male colleagues. So Cagney and Lacey decide that they will have to earn respect the hard way - on their own". The struggle against male prejudice has been a consistent thematic concern of the series, whether incidentally (in almost any episode) or centrally (for

example, "Street Scene", UK tx. 9.7.82, in which the women come up against male exclusivity, or "You Call This Plain Clothes?", UK tx. 16.7.82, in which they are "fobbed off with women's work" assignments). More recently the theme was central to "Power" (UK tx. 12.4.86), which explores the effects - for both Cagney and Lacey, and for the men - of Cagney taking charge of the precinct in the absence of Lieutenant Samuels, from explicitly hostile machismo to prejudice cloaked as bureaucracy. Gender relationships in work are implicit in the basic given situation of the series as a whole.

As we have seen, the setting up of the two women and their different situations in terms of work and domestic life allows for a range of women's issues to be explored. Around Lacey, as a married working woman, pre-eminently the strain of work for women on family and marriage (for example, "One of Our Own", UK tx.28.1.83; "Burn Out", UK tx.20.5.83; "Taxi Cab Murders", UK tx.20.11.84; among other instances), the relationship between pregnancy and work (for example, "Power"), and so on. Around Cagney, as a single working woman, problems involved in personal relationships with male colleagues (for example, "Recreational Use", UK tx. 18.3.83; "Insubordination", UK tx. 30.10.84), fears and doubts related to work arising from possible pregnancy ("Choices", UK tx. 9.6.84) or marriage ("Happily Ever After", UK tx. 24.9.85), and so on.

Sometimes a story with no particular social or feminist emphasis at all will take on a special charge from the fact that Cagney and Lacey are women. In "Heat", Lacey is taken hostage and the same story could have been followed exactly had the hostage been a male police officer. Lacey's gender is not a factor in her being held hostage, but the same story with a male hostage would have lacked the heavy threat of sexual violation which mark the episode. Similarly, Cagney's intimidation by a brutal mugger in "Stress" (UK tx. 1.10.85) has its source in her being a police officer, not a woman, yet the threat of sexual violence vitally informs the episode. In both cases, sexual difference becomes foregrounded without being made an 'issue' as such.

Cagney and Lacey has also, however, gone out of its way to deal with issues centred very specifically by the women's movement. Several episodes have looked at rape ("Open and Shut Case", UK tx. 29.4.83; "Date Rape", UK tx. 27.5.83; "Violations", UK tx. 12.11.85; "Dedication to Duty", UK tx. 19.4.86) and sexual harassment ("Rules of the Game", UK tx. 10.9.85, continued in "Con Game", UK tx. 5.11.85), while others have looked at subjects like wife beating ("Cry for Help", UK tx. 1.7.83), the traumas around breast cancer and mastectomy ("Who Said It's Fair?"), pornography ("Victimless Crime", UK tx. 12.5.84), abortion ("The Clinic", UK tx. 14.1.86), and even women's liberation itself ("Better Than Equal", UK tx. 20.8.82). On such issues Cagney and Lacey consistently adopts liberal and educative perspectives. Very often the strategy is to set up a kind of 'debate', centrally between Cagney and Lacey themselves, of course, which explores dilemmas and possible courses of action in a very accessible way which nonetheless insists on complexity and contradiction. On sexual harassment, for instance, questions are set up and debated such as: did Cagney, or did she not, do anything to 'encourage' the attentions of a senior officer? how to handle unwanted attention, when what all the magazines tell you to do fails and your job future is at stake? who to talk to about it, since senior officers are male and unhelpful? what action to take? how to respond to arguments that it is in the best interests of the organisation to not wash its dirty linen in public? how to cope with moral denigration in legal proceedings? and so on.

Sample Analysis: Abortion and "The Clinic"

A closer examination of the episode on abortion can tell us something about the way Cagney and Lacey deals with controversial issues and negotiates some of the difficulties likely to be associated with doing so. It should be remembered that this episode was made in 1985. Thus the immediate context was a neo-conservative US president who had taken a clear anti-abortion stance (a stance which, while not going so far as intending explicitly to make abortion illegal, would make it much more difficult) in the 1984 presidential campaign (Reagan-

Bush vs. Mondale-Ferraro) which at times looked as if it was about abortion; in addition there had been bomb attacks on abortion clinics. Variety reported that this episode of Cagney and Lacey did arouse the anger of the so-called 'pro-life' lobby: "So it was the controversial 'The Clinic' episode which apparently riled many right-to-lifers over the way the episode dealt with abortion. Clearly the episode tilted in direction of choice and professional medical care while the right-to-lifers had to pretty much settle for a mad bomber repping their cause. So maybe the right-to-life movement got a raw deal. Big deal. Where is it written that drama must be equally sympathetic to all sides? That's not drama, only boring television"[15]. Given what we know of network sensitivity to pressure groups on controversial topics, it may seem surprising that so apparently openly pro-abortion material was broadcast on prime time television. Cagney and Lacey is mainstream U.S. television entertainment, and in many ways it can be considered surprising (and encouraging) that such liberal perspectives are allowed relatively free passage[16]. While there can be little doubt about the episode's overall pro-choice position on abortion, only close examination can reveal precisely how such a position becomes debated and validated.

The episode, densely structured and generally satisfying in dramatic terms, aims nevertheless to 'instruct', to enter or contribute to the 'debate' and to take a position (it is interesting that on several different occasions in the episode the idea of a 'debate' is raised by the characters). Broadly, the episode follows more general Cagney and Lacey patterns: an assignment involves the two detectives in a case arising from a controversial issue; that issue is aired and discussed, centrally by Cagney and Lacey themselves, and the two take different positions, Cagney's more conservative, Lacey's more liberal; by the close of the episode Cagney's position has shifted, if not to Lacey's, at least closer to it. A political stance is thus validated but, through the complications of the case, that stance has undergone important but usually unstated modification.

There is more than one narrative thread in the episode (we can return to this

later) but the main narrative is initiated when Lieutenant Samuels asks Cagney to escort an Hispanic woman, Mrs. Herrera, to a woman's clinic which she has been afraid to enter because of a demonstration. Cagney is told it is not material whether it is an abortion clinic, that the woman should not have to explain to anybody. Lacey, told to stay behind, asks if it is because she is pregnant and persuades Samuels to let her go too. At the clinic the demonstration is still under way (the demonstrators a judicious mix of men and women, black and white, carrying placards such as "Abortion is murder", etc.). Cagney tries to clear a path for Lacey and Mrs. Herrera and Lacey is approached by the pro-life leader, a woman, how she can help to murder unborn babies when she is carrying her own child: Lacey replies that she is a law officer and that Mrs. Herrera will enter the clinic. Their way is barred while the leader argues that there are other options, such as adoption agencies, but they go inside stating that she is not there to enter the debate and is told that she "entered the discussion" when she let the woman through and is subjected to comparisons with Nazi Germany. Cagney concedes the leader's right to her opinions but not her right to bully people, but she is clearly upset and uncomfortable and takes refuge in arguing that she is just doing her job. It is not made clear why Cagney is uncomfortable, and we seem intended to wonder why. At one level this is just a narrative device. At another level it is in the nature of the series form that many spectators will remember both that in an earlier episode ("Choices") Cagney had her own fears about a possible pregnancy and that she had a Catholic upbringing.

Inside the clinic Lacey is left with a male doctor who complains that the demonstrators do not care about the already born: "Do you think these people were picketing City Hall when day care funding was cut?" (a comment which, again, sends us back to the episode "Who Said It's Fair?"). Lacey says she knows how he feels, to which he replies that he needs protection, not empathy: "It's hard enough for a woman to face an abortion, she shouldn't have to walk through that mob". He then comments on Lacey's pregnancy as "wonderful", adding "You got a ring on your finger, you got a good paying job. A lot of the women who come in aren't so

lucky". Despite his commitment the male doctor is not offered as specially sympathetic, here or later: the episode overall privileges the idea that abortion is essentially an issue for women, that it is women's views that count. Lacey's response to the doctor is somewhat cold or non-committal, and this also raises a question as to why she responds in this way.

Questions about Lacey's response are heightened in the subsequent sequence in which Cagney and Lacey drive Mrs. Herrera home, since Lacey is very supportive of the woman, in evident distress (she has not told her husband, who is on disability, and she wants to finish school, not be on welfare). Lacey offers her further help if she needs it. Cagney stays tense and outside their conversation. Alone together in the car, Lacey talks about enjoying protecting people like Mrs. Herrera and asks Cagney, stern-faced and braking sharply, if something is the matter. Cagney asks if they are running a taxi service. Lacey says nothing, but her look implies an understanding of Cagney's agitation and the need to talk it out.

Which is what happens in the next sequence, in the precinct women's locker room, the traditional location for their debates and arguments. Lacey simply emphasises a woman's right to make up her own mind about her own body. Cagney says she agrees, but she was "raised Catholic, this is a hard one for me". Lacey insists but Cagney insists too: "I am pro-choice. You know I've never lived my life any other way. But that doesn't mean... I'm also pro-life". Lacey will not have it: "So you're on everybody's side? You have to take a stand on this one, Christine, otherwise you're walking the fence". Cagney admits she is and Lacey comes back with arguments about rape, teenage pregnancies and so on, and what if she, Cagney, a thirty-eight year old woman had to "conspire with a doctor to commit a crime, it's humiliating. What if they change the law back and you don't have a choice any more?" Cagney admits she would hate it: "I'm just trying to tell you my feelings. I don't know when it's murder", to which Lacey replies "Abortion is not murder, it's not even a person yet". Lacey then points to the flawed logic of Cagney using birth control but being against abortion, to which Cagney's reply, as she leaves is that "Nobody's perfect".

This sequence establishes the debate very clearly. Two different positions and two different points of identification are offered, the two women being offered more or less equally in the visual organisation of the scene (though Lacey is mostly seated, in repose, while Cagney stands, more agitated, and Lacey remains while Cagney leaves). Lacey makes clear an absolute commitment to a woman's right to choose and the necessity of legal abortion. It appears a very principled stand: her own pregnancy seems to affirm that she is not arguing from just a personal position, but from principle. She is very clear that Cagney (that is, all women) need to embrace this principle and not sit on the fence. Given the moral weight that the series as a whole places on Lacey's wisdom and beliefs, her stand is very difficult to resist.

On the other hand, Cagney is offered as obviously troubled, committed to women's freedom to choose to live as they wish but caught in contradictory feelings about abortion. Some of the contradiction can be put down her Catholic background, but perhaps not all. She seems genuinely divided, understanding the contradiction between contraception and abortion but feeling the need to live the contradiction, to not have the answers. Considerable weight is placed on her position also, then, primarily because it stems from such deep, troubled feelings. For the spectator, of course, an additional factor adds its weight: the positions you might expect on abortion from a pregnant mother and a single career woman with occasional lovers are not forthcoming.

There follows a short sequence at Lacey's home strongly marked its intimacy, humour and commitment to childbirth, a sequence which seems designed to counter any possible connotations of the abstractly principled or impersonal in Lacey's stance in the locker room discussion. Lacey is doing pregnancy exercises while Harv reads about new methods of child delivery; both are looking forward to experiencing the birth. The effect of the sequence is to add further depth to Lacey's position on abortion, the more so in that the sequence ends with Lacey and Harv seeing a news report of the bombing of the West Side Women's Clinic, in which a vagrant has been severely burned.

Cagney and Lacey investigate the ruined building with the doctor (who is concerned - again the episode draws on actuality - that the files might be used to harass patients). They go to see the pro-life leader, who argues that no legitimate pro-life organisation condones bombings. Both Cagney and Lacey are hostile: refused a list of members - so they will not be harassed - Lacey replies: "Harassed! You mean like screaming and taunting people?". The leader insists that you do not always behave reasonably when you feel passionately about a moral issue, but Cagney will not accept her argument that it is like the civil rights and Vietnam war protests.

Their investigations are then hampered by hold-ups on forensic and lack of a file of pro-life advocates arrested for violent demonstration. In the process, Cagney is taken by a male official's compliments. Back at the precinct house, Lacey finds Mrs. Herrera and promises to make her an appointment at a new clinic, at which Cagney shows hostility, again. A call informs them that the vagrant has died, making the case a homicide.

As well as progressing the investigation, these developments continue to 'weight' Cagney and Lacey. Cagney's actions and statements appear confused: she is hostile to the doctor and to the pro-life leader, appearing primarily to retreat into 'doing her job', arguing strictly about legality, and continuing to resent Lacey's 'social worker' attention to Mrs. Herrera, apparently aloof from any 'debate'. She is also 'weakened' by being made to look foolish in her response to the city official's compliments. Lacey, on the other hand, maintains a very clear position, pointing out contradictions to the pro-life leader, betting the city official that they would have files on violent Vietnam protesters, and so on.

There follows another sequence (this is about halfway through the episode) at Lacey's home, crucial to the episode's overall construction of a position. Initially, Lacey and Harv are on their bed and she is massaging his back, the scene carrying the same connotations of humour and intimacy as before. They recall discussing starting a family and this induces Lacey to talk about Mrs. Herrera being scared and confused and having no-one to turn to. Harv says that that is what birth control is for, but Lacey will not allow him to imply judgement: "It's different when

it's you that's pregnant and you got nowhere to turn". Lacey stops massaging Harv and climbs into bed, looking away from him, and proceeds to tell her own story, in a way which implies a compulsion to re-tell it (Harv already knows the story). She reveals that at age nineteen she got pregnant, had no-one to talk to, found and went to a back-street abortionist and almost had it done: "There's people who want us to go back to that, Harv". Harv:"It'll never be that way again". Lacey: "It'll be exactly like that..." She reveals, further, that she spent her college money ("I made a choice right there") and had it done in Puerto Rico. Close to tears, she ends: "How many women do you think he butchered on that table, Harv, huh?"

A highly emotional sequence, its pro-choice implications remain very clear, yet it might be argued that it represents a modification of, and perhaps a retreat from, Lacey's earlier position in the locker room debate. Then, Lacey's position had seemed a commitment of principle. While that principle still holds for her, it now becomes also a position very much founded on personal experience (which she shares with Mrs. Herrera, for example, but not with Cagney). There is here too a class component in Lacey's need to choose between abortion and education (like Mrs. Herrera's need to choose). Certainly, this scene functions to explain Lacey's earlier reticence with the doctor, her (then unknown) personal experience affecting her response to his comments about her being secure, etc. Thus, while the pro-choice position gains added emotional weight, the principled basis of it becomes - without getting lost - some what less potentially strident, and this seems a crucial part of the episode's negotiation of the abortion issue.

Next morning, following the vagrant's death, the pro-life leader is waiting with the list of members she had previously refused: she wants her people, who "don't take life, they cherish it", exonerated. This development appears designed as a further retreat, this time from too negative a representation of the pro-life people. Importantly for our response to this, Lacey remains sceptical, offering only a clipped "Yes, ma'am". There are then further developments with city officials (with Cagney making a bigger fool of herself - though somewhat endearingly so, as so often - in making a play for the official, our response to which is much shaped by

Lacey's amused incredulity) regarding forensic evidence: it was a type of home-made bomb associated with 1960s radicals.

Back at the precinct house, Lacey offers to do Cagney's paper work so that she can meet her (ex-cop) father. As she leaves, Cagney apologises for "getting a little personal" about Lacey's belly. Lacey: "That's OK, it is personal". Cagney: "It's tough stuff". While, in a merging narrative strand, Lacey has a long conversation with Samuels about parents and children, Cagney is then shown playing pool in a bar with her father (this is their regular recreational activity together). He tells her she should try to get off the case, which would probably be easy since a lot of people at the top in the police department are Irish and feel about abortion as he does: "just because times have changed it doesn't change anything, it's still a mortal sin". When she asks him if he's so sure, he replies: "That is the way I was taught. It's the way you were taught. It is the way I believe. People a lot smarter than me spent a lot of time figuring this thing out". Cagney then asks him, what if she was pregnant, etc., etc., to which his answers are evasive, then exasperated: "What are you asking all these questions for? It's not a man's problem, you know. Sh... That's not what I meant. What I meant was... Boy this is some kind of a conversation for someone who once wanted to be a nun. But it's not going to happen, is it? So, please, it's your turn...". This is, again, obviously crucial: Cagney's doubts come up against her father's unthinking attachment to dogma and unwillingness, as a man, to engage with the issue at all. Inevitably, Cagney finds herself arguing for a woman's right to choose.

In the episode's resolution, Cagney and Lacey get a lead on a 60s woman activist (described by an ex-boyfriend as "a serious whacko... always at the causes") and Lacey's conviction that there will be a government file on her for anti-government protest (where there is none for pro-life protesters) is proved correct (much to Cagney's chagrin: she asks Lacey not to gloat). In the activist's room, a hint at the continuing debate of issues is swiftly replaced by the woman's threatening them with a bomb. They draw their guns and Cagney tries to get Lacey out of the room.

In this confrontation of guns and detonator, Lacey puts down her gun and walks towards the woman, her arms raised: "Look here, five months. You wan to kill us? Go ahead and do it, baby killer". Lacey is able to take the detonator, then holds the sobbing woman. Outside, as the woman is led away, Cagney and Lacey walk to the car and Cagney asks when Lacey is taking Mrs. Herrera to the clinic, telling her she had better get going, and that she will take care of filing the arrest report. Lacey looks at her: "You sure?" Cagney: "Yeah, it's OK". Lacey: "Thank you, sergeant". Then, a joke, confirming the re-establishment of their friendship, they drive off and the shot freezes.

How does this resolution relate to the construction, over the episode, of a position on abortion? As stated earlier, Cagney moves towards Lacey's position. There is no overtly stated change of position on Cagney's part, but her encouragement withheld until now, is made clear enough. Cagney does not know, as we do, of Lacey's personal experience of abortion. Her change of view is shown as stemming primarily from the conversation with her father, which focusses both the personal and the general dimensions of the issue for her (though the tactics of the pro-lifers also affect her thinking). Although the principle of a woman's right to choose is validated in the episode, by its end this principle has become somewhat clouded (in comparison with its clear statement by Lacey earlier) and hence, perhaps, less bluntly controversial. First, the emphasis on individual experience and need (principally Lacey's and Mrs. Herrera's) tends to shift the focus away from the principle. Second, despite her change of view, Cagney's divided feelings are not returned to: the force of those anti-abortion feelings is allowed to remain. Third, Lacey's invitation to the bomber at the end to "kill us" seems to imply a recognition of the foetus as a person in a kind of contradictory concession to Cagney's earlier uncertainties about unborn babies (contrasting with Lacey's "it's not even a person yet"). Fourth, there is considerable ambiguity (perhaps confusion) around the presentation of the pro-lifers. Initially presented as very unsympathetic, they co-operate with the police following the death of the vagrant. Their help, however, is intended to prove that pro-lifers do <u>not</u> engage in violence,

while the implication of the ending is that such organisations do shelter (even if they do not condone) violent activism. At the same time, some effort seems to have gone into making the bomber untypical.

A number of other factors also work to cloud the initial clarity of the central issue. A secondary story line, not without its own interest, involves the relationship of Samuels with his estranged grown-up son. Samuels is disappointed that his son has not lived up to his expectations, and specifically distressed to learn that his son has got married, without informing him, and to a divorced Vietnamese woman (Samuels is Jewish). Following a long conversation with Lacey about parents' tribulations with children, Samuels visits his son and his wife and there is what appears complete reconciliation. This secondary narrative, highly resolved, tends to dissipate some of the effect of the main narrative, partly by the emotional response it demands, partly by its emphasis on 'universal' familial problems and conflicts. More generally, the main narrative's demand for the spectator's attention to action and plot development is more insistent in the seond half of the episode, leaving less space (or less obvious space) for any more contemplative working through of positions in any explicit ways.

## Conclusions

The call in film and television studies has long been dominantly one for, as John Caughie puts it, "forms which will produce the spectator in contradiction". To argue for such forms

> implies a position within a wider political debate against the political effectiveness of notions of experience and solidarity. For television, I am less confident of this position. Under certain conditions, of which the present may be one, I want to be able to say that, <u>for television</u>, in its specific conditions, it may be politically progprogressive to confirm an identity (of sexuality or class), to recover

> repressed experience or history, to contest the dominant image with an alternative identity[17].

In this perspective, given both the political climate and the general situation of broadcasting in the U.S. in the 1980s, Cagney and Lacey must be regarded as progressive. This paper does not seek to argue that Cagney and Lacey is radically feminist or radical in any other ways, formally or thematically, but rather that it is difficult to imagine any spectator (at least any spectator not already determinedly anti-abortion) coming away from "The Clinic" without a more open position on abortion or a sense of challenge to conservative orthodoxy on the matter. In the context of the U.S. in the mid-1980s this seems an achievement important enough to be noted.

As argued earlier, Cagney and Lacey is in many ways a product of the 1970s rather than the 1980s, with an affinity with what has been called 'new women's cinema' in Hollywood. Annette Kuhn has argued that 'new Hollywood cinema' in general "reworks rather than destroys the textual operations of dominant cinema" and that "new women's cinema cannot in the final instance deal in any direct way with the questions which feminism poses for cinematic representation"[18] (that is, they do not offer "forms which will produce the spectator in contradiction"). Before reaching these conclusions, however, Kuhn acknowledges that some case can be made that though this cinema's forms are illusionist "their appropriation for feminism can in certain circumstances be productive"[19], particularly in terms of "easy and pleasurable" spectator identifications:

> The pleasure for the female spectator of films of this kind lies in several possible identifications: with a central character who is not only also a woman, but who may be similar in some respects to the spectator herself; or with a narrative voice enunciated by a woman character; or with fictional events which evoke a degree of recognition; or with a resolution that constitutes a 'victory' for the central character. The address of the new women's film may thus position the spectator not only as herself a potential 'winner', but also as a winner whose gender is instrumental in the victory: it may consequently

offer the female spectator a degree of affirmation[20].

Cagney and Lacey clearly provides progressive pleasures of these kinds. But, Kuhn argues, since feminism is controversial and since Hollywood products do not wish to alienate sections of their audience, more 'open' texts - "films whose address sustains a degree of polysemy - which open up rather than restrict readings" - appeal to a more broadly-based audience: "Openness permits readings to be made which accord more or less with spectators' prior stances on feminist issues"[21]. As we have seen in the case of "The Clinic" Cagney and Lacey adopts, perhaps inevitably, some of these strategies. It might be expected, however, given the much more heterogeneous audience for network television, that a show like Cagney and Lacey would tend to openness much more emphatically than films like Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, An Unmarried Woman or (Kuhn's main examples) Julia or Girlfiends. As the analysis of "The Girlfriends shows (and it would) be true of many other episodes and issues too), this is hardly the case: Cagney and Lacey negotiates controversial issues, and particularly ones associated with feminism, with considerable explicit commitment to its positions (even if, finally, that commitment is not left unambiguous). Its success in this enterprise, in the mainstream of popular television, owes at least something to the dialectical manner in which it uses the 'buddy' pairing of the two women to engage in debate, as well as something to its exploitation of the potential of the series format for the development and change of identity and experience over time.

Notes

1. "Dialogue on Film: Barbara Corday", American Film, July-August 1985, p.11.
2. Molly Haskell, From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974; London, New English Library, 1975).
3. Ron Krueger, "Cagney: no doubts says Rosenzweig", Screen International, 17-24 November 1984, p.21.
4. See Paul Kerr's discussion, "Watching the Detectives", Primetime, vol.1, no.1, July 1981, from which my overview here derives.
5. "Police Story showed male officers in a new light, as complex human beings. But Police Woman had gorgeous Angie Dickinson decked out in skintight outfits, getting herself into ugly, suggestive situations, forever playing at whoredom and forever pulling back at the last moment. In nearly every episode, she got herself into threatening situations and her male partners rescue her. Young policewomen around the country felt that this show made their lives a little harder. They felt degraded by the image presented". From Dorothy Uhnak, "A Female Cop's Testimonial: 'I'd Walk Through A Dark Alley with Cagney or Lacey Behind Me'", TV Guide, 2 February 1985, p.6.
6. See, for example, Charlotte Brunsdon discussion of An Unmarried Woman, "A Subject for the Seventies...", Screen, vol.23, nos.3-4, Sept-Oct 1982.
7. See the discussion of such movies in Annette Kuhn, Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema (London & Boston, 1982, Routledge & Kegan Paul), pp.131-140.
8. The differences between the two characters have been affected by - or reflected in - changes in casting. Different accounts have circulated of the reasons for the replacement of Meg Foster by Sharon Gless. The most common version holds that US audiences found the relationship between the two women in the first series unacceptable and that CBS pressed for a less tough, more feminine Cagney (see, for example, Patrick Stoddart, "Good, old-fashioned American rubbish", Broadcast, 6 September 1982, p.16). Barney Rosenzweig gives a slightly different version (as reported by Richard Turner, "The Curious Case of the Lady Copsand the Shots that Blew Them Away", TV Guide, 8 October 1983, p.54), recalling CBS executive Harvey Shephard

feeling "that those two women are too similar, too 'street'; they're both blue-collar". These stories are complicated - though by no means contradicted - by the fact that Gless had been the original choice for Cagney.

9. Quoted by Chris Wicking in "Lou Grant", in Jane Feuer et al., MTM: 'Quality Television' (London, British Film Institute, 1984), pp.172-3.

10. Ibid., p.173.

11. It is highly relevant to note that American Dream was also the title of a pilot and series developed in 1980 (alongside the Cagney and Lacey TV movie) by Rosenzweig. The pilot centred on inner city housing and other issues and was liberal in outlook. ABC pulled the series after four episodes. Todd Gitlin tells the story behind the short-lived series in "Another American Dream Gone Astray" in Gitlin, Inside Prime Time (New York, Pantheon, 1983).

12. Joyce Seenila; Cagney and Lacey: Rat Just a Coupla Chicks Sitting Around Talking. Emmy, vol.7, no.2, March-April 1985, p.25.

13. Sharon Gless in interview with Terry Wogan, Wogan, BBC TV, 14 October 1985.

14. Barney Rosenzweig, quoted in Joyce Sunila, op. cit., p.25.

15. Report by "Loft.", Variety, 20 November 1985, pp.65, 94.

16. Todd Gitlin's pessimistic account of network shift to the right in the 1980s is no doubt justified ("the space for political diversity at the networks has shrunk"), but it is surprising that he does not give more consideration to Cagney and Lacey as a show running counter in many respects to the trend; see Gitlin's Introduction to the second (1985) edition of Inside Prime Time.

17. John Caughie, "Progressive Television and Documentary Drama", Screen, vol.21, no.3, 1980, pp.33-4, reprinted in Tony Bennett et al., Popular Television and Film (London, British Film Institute in association with The Open University Press, 1981).

18. Kuhn, op. cit., pp.139-40.

19. Ibid., p.134.

20. Ibid., p.136.

21. Ibid., p.139.